Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 in A Major op. 92
Robert Schumann: Symphony No. 2 in C Major op. 61

Olivier Messiaen, one of the most influential figures of French music in the twentieth century, was fond of referring to himself as a »rhythmist«. »I studied the rhythms of the Hindus, the Greeks, even the rhythms in the movements of stars, atoms and the human body.« This gave rise to music that is decisively characterized by rhythmic motifs and structures.

This was all very modern, but by no means new. We do not even need to go back to the isorhythmic motets of the late Middle Ages, but only as far as the Viennese classical period. If there is a composer whose themes and formal strategy were decisively marked by rhythmic motifs and their forward-driving power, then it was Ludwig van Beethoven. And this applies particularly to his Symphony No. 7 in A Major op. 92 (1811-12). The »poco sostenuto« introduction of the first movement is a model of how the tension between stationary half-notes and a quite regular scale in sixteenths can gradually give rise to a dotted rhythm which suddenly jumps out of an apparent, almost sleepy sort of calmness, plunges into the »vivace« of the main movement and generates an entire theme in a rapid variation on the well-known »Siciliano« figure. And that is not all. The dotted rhythm engulfs the second theme, the elaboration and finally, in a mighty crescendo, the coda.

If the rhythms in Beethoven’s earlier symphonies were already an integral part of his musical rhetoric, so to speak, then the Symphony No. 7 even shatters the bounds of rhetorical »structure« in favor of an unfettered, dithyrambic zest for life whose release was almost unsettling to many of his contemporaries. Carl Maria von Weber suspected that Beethoven had »gone completely crazy«, a supposition which says more about Weber’s mental state than about Beethoven’s ingenious impetus.

The »allegretto« funeral march, an original combination of three- or five-section song form and a series of variations in the place traditionally taken by the slow movement, also exhibits only a few marked melodic contours in its main theme, presenting instead persistent repeats of the rhythm of the ancient Greek dactyl (»tum ta-ta«). Although the »presto« scherzo is determined by the rapid quater-note movement throughout, its striking rhythmic character is due to the emphasis falling constantly on unaccented beats. The finale, »allegro con brio«, proclaims the rhythmic figure of the dactyl twice even before the actual theme (»tum ta-ta / tum«), now at an outright frenzied tempo. This figure, in an utterly frenetic mood, dominates the entire last movement even more than the »siciliano« rhythm in the first movement.

Richard Wagner called Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 an »apotheosis of the dance«. Although this attribute may not be entirely fitting for Robert Schumann’s Symphony No. 2 in C Major op. 61 (1845-46), nonetheless it need not fear comparison with the symphony by Beethoven as far as the determining force of its rhythmic figures is concerned. At the beginning of the introduction, »sostenuto assai«, the horns sound a salient motif whose melodic form is the simplest imaginable – keynote, the fifth above, keynote, the fifth below, keynote – whose sharply punctuated rhythm not only conveys the impression of a majestic entrance, but also reappears in the
movement’s coda as well as in the form of a variation in the finale. Dotted rhythms also determine the precipitously formulated main themes in the fast part of the first movement, »allegro ma non troppo«, and the finale, »allegro molto vivace «, and the energy of these figures roils like an undercurrent through the secondary themes, only being brought together again by the »maestoso« character of the coda in the finale, where it is also amplified.

The emancipation of rhythm from the dominance of melody and harmony – these two works by Beethoven and Schumann unleashed a power whose aftershocks were still being heard in the musical revolutions of the twentieth century. You might well say that it even made them possible.

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